PATTERNS OF POWER

Three Answers to One Position

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A Standalone Demonstration of Position Logic — That a Simple Engine of Benefit Weighed Against Cost, and a Deeper Layer Beneath It Governing What a Person Can Even See, Explain Not Only How One Human Being Decides but Why Unconnected Civilisations Converge on a Narrow Menu of Real Answers Rather Than an Infinite Range of Different Ones; That Once a Hierarchy Exists, Holding Down the Governed Is, Relative to Everything Else a Ruler Must Do, a Solved Problem; That the Genuinely Open Problem Is Inside the Hierarchy — How to Get the Administrative and Martial Capacity a State Needs Without Its Own Servants Turning Into Rivals Strong Enough to Replace the Centre; and That Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and Imperial China, With No Contact and No Shared Inheritance, Answered That One Position With Three Different but Recognisably Cousin Solutions. Held as Tested, Not Revealed

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A STUDY IN THE PATTERNS OF POWER

Preface

This paper stands on its own. It assumes no other reading, explains every idea it borrows before it uses it, and can be handed to someone who has never encountered this collection before. Its purpose is to state a method — call it position logic — as plainly as the method allows, and then to prove that it is not merely a plausible way of talking about power but an actual working tool, by using it to solve a real puzzle: why three civilisations that never met, never read each other, and shared almost nothing in law, religion, or geography, nonetheless built strikingly similar institutions to solve what turns out to be the identical structural problem. The three are medieval and early modern Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and imperial China, and the problem is not the one most historical writing reaches for first — it is not how a ruler holds down the people he rules. That problem, this paper will argue, is comparatively tractable, and every one of the three civilisations solved it the same way, by a route this paper explains from first principles rather than assumes. The genuinely hard and recurring problem, the one that actually explains the strange convergences this paper traces, sits one level up: how does a hierarchy, once built, keep its own administrative and martial servants — the very people it needs to run itself — from turning that capacity into a claim on the throne? That is the position all three civilisations occupied. This paper is about the answers.

The Argument in Twelve Parts

I — The Wager. Explaining human events without removing the human: no History, no spirit of the age, no invisible hand, no class-mind — only individuals, each deciding from where he stands.

II — The Engine and Its Two Caveats. Benefit against cost is the whole of the engine; two caveats make it usable — benefit is fixed by what a person values, and a cost binds only where it is credible.

III — The Field Beneath the Ledger. Before a person can weigh anything, his position has already decided what he can see at all — which options, dangers, and facts are even present to be weighed.

IV — Convergence Without Contact. Why unconnected people facing the same structural position tend to find similar answers, without conspiracy, imitation, or a guiding hand — and why the answers are similar in shape and different in detail.

V — How a Hierarchy Is Born. Division of labour forces a division of knowing; no one can verify more than a sliver of what a complex society needs to know; trust in specialists one cannot check becomes unavoidable; and hierarchy, with an interpreter class at its centre, is the near-automatic result.

VI — The Problem That Gets Solved, and the One That Does Not. Once a hierarchy exists, holding the governed down is a comparatively solved problem. The problem that stays open, in every case this paper examines, is holding down the hierarchy's own servants.

VII — Position One: Europe's Export. Primogeniture manufactures a landless, ambitious, martially trained surplus automatically, every generation; Europe's answer was to send that surplus outward, to a Crusade, a reconquest, or a colony.

VIII — Position Two: The Ottoman Prevention. The Ottoman Empire built the opposite machine — a law of inheritance that would not concentrate an estate, an army recruited from outside the free population entirely, land grants that could not be inherited, and a standing right to confiscate a servant's fortune at death — designed to keep the surplus from ever consolidating into a class at all.

IX — Position Three: China's Rotation. Imperial China answered with a third route again: recruit administrators by written examination rather than by blood, and then rotate every one of them away from the district he came from, so that talent could never convert into a local, hereditary power base.

X — Three Solutions, One Position. Laid side by side, the three answers are not three different problems. They are the same problem, met by civilisations with no contact between them, each working with the particular materials its own history happened to leave lying around.

XI — Why None of the Three Held Forever. All three machines eventually leaked, in each case in the specific place its own design was weakest — evidence that the underlying pressure never actually goes away, only gets deferred.

XII — Held as Tested. The honest limits of the comparison, and the strongest case that these are three different stories being made to look like one.

Part I — The Wager

Almost every large explanation of human events ever offered has made the same move: it explains what happened by reaching for something bigger than any person to do the explaining. A providence guiding events toward a destination. A History with a direction of its own, carrying people along rather than being carried by them. A spirit of the age that somehow gets into everyone's head at once. An invisible hand steering outcomes no one intended. A class that thinks and wants as if it were a single mind, with the millions of actual people in it serving merely as its hands and feet. Each of these is comforting in the same way, because each lets the explainer stop at a level above the individual person and declare the job done.

This paper refuses that move, and the refusal is the whole of its method. You cannot take the human being out of human affairs, because nothing in human affairs happens except by way of some particular person, standing in some particular place, deciding something. There is no agent above anyone's head. Whatever pattern a historian points to — an empire's rise, a revolution's shape, three unconnected civilisations building similar institutions — is nothing but what a very large number of individual, separate decisions add up to, once you stand back far enough to see the shape they make together. This is not a denial that patterns are real. It is an insistence on where to look for their cause: not above the individual, but in the

position each individual actually occupied, and the ordinary human calculation he ran from inside it.

Part II — The Engine and Its Two Caveats

Strip the method to its bones and it is one sentence. A person occupies a position — a place in a family, a rank in an army, a seat at a court, a plot of land under someone else's law — and that position hands him a set of things he could possibly do, along with whatever tools and allies and information happen to be available to him at that moment, what this paper will keep calling the materials at hand. He chooses among those possible actions by weighing what he takes to be the benefit of each against what he takes to be its cost, and he does what comes out ahead. That is the entire engine. It has no moving parts beyond a person, a position, and a comparison.

Stated this baldly, the sentence explains nothing, because it describes every decision anyone has ever made and therefore rules nothing out. Two additions turn it from an empty truism into a tool that actually predicts something, and both were named clearly by economists working on other problems entirely, which is worth pausing on, because it means the mechanism was not invented for this purpose — it kept getting rediscovered because it is really there.

The first addition concerns the benefit side of the ledger, and it is the deeper of the two. Benefit is not a fact sitting out in the world, obvious to everyone the same way. What counts as a benefit to a given

person depends entirely on what that person happens to value, and people value wildly different and often incommensurable things — money, yes, but also honour, the safety of a child, the purity of a doctrine, the good opinion of neighbours whose respect a person cannot live without, the promise of a reward no one alive has ever seen. The economist Amartya Sen made a version of this point in an argument against what he called the "rational fool" — the imagined actor, common in older economic theory, who is assumed to want only one thing, generally wealth, and to pursue it with perfect consistency. Real people, Sen observed, hold plural values that often conflict, and a theory that flattens them down to a single objective will mispredict real behaviour constantly, not because people are irrational but because the theory has quietly smuggled in an assumption about what they want that most of them do not actually hold. Applied here, the point is this: two people standing in the identical position, facing the identical set of possible actions, can choose oppositely, and both can be behaving with perfect internal logic, if what each of them counts as a benefit is not the same thing. To predict a person's choice, you must first know what he values — and nothing in the bare engine tells you that on its own.

The second addition concerns the cost side, and it is the mirror image of the first. A possible cost does not automatically weigh on a decision merely by existing. It weighs on a decision only if the person believes he will actually be made to pay it — only, in the strategist Thomas Schelling's phrase, if the threat behind it is credible. A punishment that exists on paper but that no one will actually enforce restrains no one, because the person facing it has correctly priced it at

zero; and a punishment that is perfectly real but that the person does not believe is real restrains him exactly as little, until something teaches him otherwise. Schelling built this insight studying nuclear deterrence and bargaining between states, but the logic is not specific to statecraft. It applies to a peasant deciding whether the tax collector's threat is real this year, to a merchant deciding whether a new law will actually be policed, to a general weighing whether disobeying an order will really end his career or merely be talked about and forgotten.

Put the two together and the engine becomes genuinely useful: a person decides by weighing a benefit fixed by what he values against a cost fixed by what he actually believes will be collected from him, and because both of these vary from person to person and from moment to moment, the same objective situation can produce different decisions in different hands. This is the honest difficulty at the centre of the whole method, and it should be named rather than hidden: in real time, watching a living person decide, you cannot see directly into either dial. You cannot read his values off his face, and you cannot always tell in advance whether a threatened cost will in fact be imposed. What the method offers is not a machine that predicts individual behaviour with certainty — it is a discipline for reconstructing, after the fact or from the available evidence, what a person's benefit and cost columns most likely looked like from where he stood, and a caution against assuming they looked like your own.

Part III — The Field Beneath the Ledger

There is a further layer beneath even these two dials, and it is the one most easily missed, because it does not show up as a number on either side of the ledger. Before a person can weigh a benefit against a cost, the option in question has to be present to him at all — visible, thinkable, something he could conceivably choose. A position does not only attach prices to a fixed menu of choices. It draws, prior to any pricing, the boundary of what a person can even see: which facts reach him, which possibilities occur to him as possibilities, which features of the world register as facts rather than dissolving into an unnoticed background. Call this the field of the visible.

The image worth holding onto is a tide. A man who works the water knows the tide the way he knows his own hands — its timing, its danger, its rhythm through the month — because his position puts it constantly before him and his safety depends on tracking it. A man who has lived his whole life a mile inland does not believe a false thing about the tide. He simply has no thought about it at all; it has never entered his field, because nothing in his position ever put it there. The two men are not disagreeing about a fact. One of them is inside a field that contains the tide and the other is inside a field that does not, and neither man experiences his own field as bounded — each takes the edge of what he can see for the edge of the world itself. This is

why the same objective situation, viewed from two different positions, can produce two people who are not merely valuing things differently but are, in the most literal sense, working from different worlds — one man's obvious fact is the other man's non-event, not rejected but never received.

The consequence for reading any historical decision is severe, and it reverses the usual order of analysis. It is not enough to reconstruct what a person valued and what he feared would cost him; you must first reconstruct what was even available for him to value or fear, because an option outside his field is not a costly option he wisely declined — it is a non-option he never reached at all, and crediting him with having weighed and rejected it is a category error. This is also, and not incidentally, the reason the method is not a determinism. A position sets a field and a rough shape for the ledger within it, but it does not dictate the outcome, because within any field two people can still value differently, and any given field is itself the product of countless prior positions and prior choices, not a fixed cage stamped once and unchangeable.

Part IV — Convergence Without Contact

Put the engine and the field together and a striking prediction falls out, one this whole paper exists to test against real cases rather than merely assert. If a position poses the same hard structural problem to two people — even two people separated by an ocean, a religion, and a thousand years of unshared history — and if each of them runs the same basic engine, weighing benefit against cost from within whatever field his own position and era happen to supply, then the two are likely to arrive at *recognisably similar* answers, not because either copied the other and not because some larger force pushed them toward the same conclusion, but because the position itself only admits a short menu of moves that actually work. This is the method's account of convergence, and it is worth being precise about what it does and does not claim.

It does not claim that unconnected people will reach identical solutions. Their materials at hand differ — the specific laws they inherited, the specific institutions already lying around for them to repurpose, the specific opportunities their geography happened to offer — and the field of the visible differs correspondingly, so the *detail* of the solution will differ, often sharply. What the method predicts is convergence of *shape*: that the underlying structural move — export the pressure, or suppress its formation, or rotate the men

who might exploit it — will recur, dressed in whatever local materials were available to build it from. And there is a subtler reason to expect this kind of convergence to show up disproportionately in the historical record even if it were not universal: a civilisation that hit on a workable answer to a hard structural problem tended to survive and leave a full record of itself; a civilisation that tried an unworkable answer tended to fracture, be conquered, or fade, and left a thinner trace for the next observer to find. What looks, from a distance, like several independent minds arriving at the same wisdom is, at least in part, an artefact of a filter: the workable answers are simply what remains to be observed. Neither reading requires a hidden hand. Both are compatible with nothing more than individual people, in individual positions, running the same ordinary calculation and leaving different amounts of evidence behind depending on whether the calculation paid off.

Part V — How a Hierarchy Is Born

The rest of this paper needs one more piece of machinery before the three cases can be run, and it concerns not any single person's decision but how a hierarchy comes to exist at all — because the puzzle this paper is built around only makes sense once that question has been answered honestly, from first principles, rather than assumed.

Begin with a fact almost too obvious to state: a complex society divides its labour. Not everyone farms; not everyone builds; not everyone heals the sick or keeps the accounts or trains the soldiers. This division is not a choice imposed from above — it is close to the founding move of civilisation itself, because a group of specialists, each doing one thing well and depending on the others for the rest, can produce far more than the same number of people each trying to do everything for themselves. But the division of labour has a shadow that gets far less attention than the division of goods it produces, and the shadow is this: if labour divides, *knowledge* divides with it, because the same specialisation that makes a person excellent at one thing leaves him no time, and often no ability, to master everything else his life depends on. The philosopher John Hardwig gave this its sharp modern name, arguing that a very great deal of what any reasonable person believes is believed not because he has personally

checked it but because he trusts the people who have — and that this trust is not a failure of rigour but a requirement of it, since no single mind could possibly verify more than the smallest fraction of what a life in a complex society requires it to rely on. You believe a medicine is safe without repeating the trial yourself. You believe a bridge will hold without redoing the engineering. You believe a distant country exists, that the sun does not orbit the earth, that a surgeon has trained properly, on the word of people whose competence you personally have no way to assess. And the dependence is not confined to the uneducated: the physicist depends on the historian, the historian on the physician, the physician on the engineers who built her instruments, and not one of them personally checks more than a sliver of the total structure of belief he actually relies on to get through a day.

This is the condition — call it, as this paper will, the division of knowing — from which hierarchy arises with something close to inevitability, and it is worth stating plainly why. Once a population is large and complex enough that no one can personally verify most of what keeps it running, someone has to occupy the position of the trusted source for each domain of knowledge and each domain of coordination — someone who administers the granary, someone who interprets the law, someone who commands the men who keep order, someone who tells the rest of the population what the gods require or what the ancestors intended or what the sacred texts mean. None of this requires a conspiracy or a founding villain. It requires only a population too large and too specialised for any one member to hold the whole of what it needs to know, which is to say, it requires

nothing more than success — a civilisation complex enough to be worth calling one. Hierarchy, and an interpreter class sitting at its centre, is not something imposed on society from outside. It is close to the default configuration any sufficiently complex society falls into, for the same reason a body develops organs rather than staying a single undifferentiated cell.

Part VI — The Problem That Gets Solved, and the One That Does Not

Once a hierarchy exists, a further step tends to follow close behind it, and this paper will not dwell on it at length because it is not the step this paper is about, but it has to be named to make sense of what comes next. The people occupying the administrative and interpretive positions a complex society requires — the men who coordinate the granary, command the soldiers, and interpret the sacred texts — are also, by the same position, the people best placed to notice that the surplus flowing through their hands could flow, in larger measure, toward themselves. Coordination curdles into capture. A position built to serve the whole becomes a position that also extracts from it, and a small class comes to live off a surplus it does not itself produce, backed by an armed force it commands and a belief system it interprets. None of this requires villainy any more than the hierarchy's original formation did; it requires only that the position, once occupied, reveals an opportunity the engine described in Part II will predict most occupants take.

What is worth noticing, once this capture has happened, is how comparatively tractable the resulting problem of *holding the governed down* turns out to be. A ruling class that controls organised force and

controls the population's trusted sources of information has, in combination, an extremely reliable set of tools: a credible threat of violence prices rebellion too high for most people to choose it, and a belief installed early and deeply enough — through family, ritual, schooling, the sheer repetition of a story told before a child can question it — makes most of the governed defend the arrangement themselves, experiencing it not as domination but as simply how the world is. Get the belief installed deeply enough over enough generations and the force barely needs to show itself at all; the machine, in a phrase this paper will use without further ceremony, runs itself. This is not to say holding the governed down is effortless or without cost — the belief must be built and maintained, and where it thins the force must show itself more visibly, sometimes brutally. But it is a problem with a known, repeatable, and reliably effective solution, one every durable civilisation this paper examines solved by essentially the same combination of credible force and deep formation, and solving it well is close to a precondition for a hierarchy surviving long enough to be studied at all.

The problem that does *not* have a known, reliable, one-size-fits-all solution is the one sitting one level up, inside the hierarchy rather than beneath it, and it is the actual subject of this paper. A ruling centre needs administrative and martial capacity to function at all — men who can fight, men who can collect and record and interpret — and the same capacity that makes those men useful to the centre also makes them dangerous to it, because a man trained to command soldiers or to administer a province has, by that very training, acquired the tools he would need to seize either for himself. The

centre cannot simply refuse to build this capacity, because a state without administrators or soldiers is not a state. It cannot straightforwardly control it either, because the people it would use to control the capacity are drawn from the same pool of formed, capable men who pose the risk in the first place. This is the structural position every durable hierarchy this paper examines has occupied, once past its own founding: how do you get the capable, formed men a state requires without those men consolidating into a class that can outbid or simply replace you? Unlike the problem of the governed, this one has no single reliable solution repeated identically everywhere it appears. It has, instead, a short menu of genuinely different answers — and the rest of this paper is a tour of three civilisations that each, independently, worked out an item from that menu.

Part VII — Position One: Europe's Export

Medieval and early modern Europe's route to this position began, in most of its major kingdoms, with a rule of inheritance called primogeniture: when a landholding father died, his entire estate — not a share of it, the whole of it — passed to his eldest son, while every younger son inherited nothing of the land itself. The rule had an obvious virtue from the standpoint of anyone trying to keep an estate intact across generations: it stopped a family's holdings from fragmenting into ever-smaller slivers with each new generation, which partible inheritance systems, where every son takes a share, tend to produce over time. But it had an equally obvious and less often remarked consequence on the human side of the ledger. Every generation, a landholding family that produced more than one surviving son manufactured, automatically and without anyone intending it, one or more young men formed from birth to every expectation of a lord's life — trained in arms, raised to command, educated to a station — and denied, by a rule of law rather than any failure on their own part, the estate that would have let them live it. Manual labour and trade were considered beneath the dignity even a landless younger son retained by birth, which meant the two respectable outlets left to him were the Church and the sword. Primogeniture, in other words, was a machine for generating, reliably

and every generation, exactly the formed, capable, landless, and ambitious surplus this paper's sixth part described as the dangerous kind — and it generated it automatically, as a side effect of a rule adopted for an entirely different reason, protecting the integrity of the eldest son's inheritance.

Europe's answer, worked out gradually across nine centuries rather than designed at a single stroke, was to send this surplus outward rather than let it accumulate at home. The historian Georges Duby argued that eleventh-century Europe's landless younger sons, the *iuvenes*, supplied much of the martial energy behind the Crusading movement that began in 1095 — a war that let a man in exactly this position seek land, plunder, and the remission of his sins simultaneously, a single expedition serving several of his benefit column's entries at once. The same pressure ran south in Iberia across the far longer Reconquista, the centuries-long Christian reconquest of Muslim-held territory, which absorbed the Iberian kingdoms' own surplus of landless sons in exchange for land and a formal rank — the hidalgo, "son of somebody" — that carried honour without necessarily carrying an inheritance to match. And when Spain's Reconquista finally completed with the fall of Granada in January 1492, the same pool of formed, landless, ambitious younger sons found a new and vastly larger outlet within the year: Columbus sailed that August, and the men who conquered Mexico and Peru in the following decades — Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro among them — were disproportionately drawn from exactly this class, poor hidalgo families in Spain's harder provinces with nothing much to leave a younger son. England ran the identical machine on a slower

clock, and its own record shows what happens when the outlet runs behind the pressure: its continental outlet, the Hundred Years War against France, ended in 1453, and its overseas outlet did not open in earnest until Jamestown in 1607, a gap of a century and a half during which the same landless-younger-son pressure, with nowhere legitimate to go, discharged instead into the Wars of the Roses, a domestic civil war fought substantially among exactly this class of disappointed, formed, martially trained men.

Europe's position, then, and its answer: a rule of inheritance manufactured a surplus automatically, and the solution was to give the surplus somewhere else to point itself, keeping the ambition that primogeniture created pointed outward, toward a frontier, rather than inward, toward the men who already held the land.

Part VIII — Position Two: The Ottoman Prevention

The Ottoman Empire faced the identical structural position — how to get administrative and martial capacity without that capacity turning on the centre — and answered it by a route that inverted Europe's at nearly every step. The inversion begins with inheritance law itself. Islamic law, which governed Ottoman succession to property, does not permit anything resembling primogeniture: a deceased man's estate is divided among all of his sons by a fixed formula set out in the Quran, with daughters taking a half-share and no more than a third of the whole freely willable away from the relatives the law names. One traditional gloss on the law states its effect on inheritance directly, that it delivered a "death-blow to the law of primogeniture." An Ottoman estate did not concentrate in one heir while the rest went empty-handed. It fragmented across every surviving son — a different structural pressure from Europe's landless-younger-son problem, and one that, on its own, would not have manufactured anything like Europe's automatic supply of formed, landless claimants.

But the Ottoman state did not simply rely on this legal difference; it built, on top of it, an entire additional apparatus aimed directly at preventing a hereditary administrative or martial class from forming at all, whatever the general inheritance law might otherwise have

allowed to accumulate. The empire's standing army and much of its senior administration were staffed through the devshirme, a periodic levy of Christian boys taken from the Balkan provinces of the empire, converted to Islam, and trained from childhood for the Janissary infantry or the palace bureaucracy. The purpose was stated candidly in the historical record: the system was built, in the words of one modern account, "so as not to develop any hereditary aristocracy which could threaten the position of the sultan and his family," and for roughly two centuries the rule cut both ways — the sons and grandsons of existing Janissaries were themselves barred from the corps, so that the empire's core administrative and military class was recruited from entirely outside the population that might otherwise have supplied a rival native nobility, generation after generation, rather than being allowed to reproduce itself from within. Where a free Turkish Muslim family's son did have a legitimate martial outlet, it ran through a different institution again, the timar, a grant of a conquered territory's tax revenue awarded to a cavalryman in exchange for annual military service — but the grant, unlike a European fief, reverted to the state on the holder's death rather than passing automatically to his son, who had to earn his own rather than inherit his father's. And a third mechanism worked on wealth already earned rather than land or office newly granted: müsadere, the sultan's standing right to confiscate the fortune of a deceased or disgraced official, applied specifically to the fiscal and political elite, meant that even a spectacularly successful career at the top of Ottoman service did not reliably outlive the man who built it,

discouraging exactly the kind of durable, multi-generational family consolidation Europe's primogeniture achieved almost by design.

The Ottoman position, then, and its answer: rather than let a hereditary claimant class form automatically and then find it somewhere to send its overflow, the state built four separate mechanisms — an inheritance law that would not concentrate an estate, an army and bureaucracy recruited from permanent outsiders, land grants that reverted to the state rather than passing to an heir, and a standing right to confiscate accumulated wealth — whose combined effect, for a real and substantial stretch of history, was to prevent the dangerous class from consolidating in the first place, rather than manage one once it had.

Part IX — Position Three: China's Rotation

Imperial China occupied the same structural position a third time, entirely without contact with either Europe or the Ottoman world, and its answer diverges from both of theirs in a way that is worth stating precisely, because it is neither pure export nor pure prevention-by-outsider-recruitment. China's route was recruitment by demonstrated merit, followed by deliberate, repeated rotation.

Before the system this section describes took shape, access to Chinese officialdom had run substantially through birth and pedigree — a period, roughly the third to the fifth centuries, when a formal ranking system sorted candidates for office chiefly by family background, entrenching a hereditary aristocracy in the machinery of the state much as Europe's landed nobility was entrenched in its own. The Sui dynasty, unifying China in 589 after centuries of division, broke with this directly: the emperor Wen reformed official selection to prioritise demonstrated competence in the Confucian classics over family pedigree, a change one modern account frames explicitly as an attempt to check the hereditary aristocratic dominance the previous system had entrenched and the regional warlordism it tended to produce. Over the following centuries, refined especially under the Tang and then the Song dynasties, this became the keju, the imperial examination system: a standardised written test, open in principle to

almost any adult male regardless of wealth or family standing, administered at local, provincial, and national levels, success at which was the primary legitimate route into the ranks of the empire's administrators. The system's own internal rules pressed the anti-hereditary logic further still — officials related by blood or marriage were forbidden to conduct business together, members of the imperial family itself were barred from holding high administrative office, and public schools were established specifically so that a talented candidate too poor to pay for education privately could still sit the examination on comparable footing.

The feature of the system most directly relevant to this paper's question, though, is not the examination's openness but what happened to a man after he passed it, because passing alone would not have prevented a talented official from doing exactly what a European lord or an Ottoman ayan eventually did — converting ability into a durable local powerbase. The Chinese state's answer to that risk was the law of avoidance, huibi, formalised from 1037 onward: an official could not be posted to serve in his own home district, and postings were rotated, typically every three years, specifically so that a capable administrator could never remain in one place long enough to build the kind of entrenched local following, patronage network, or landed base that would let his competence convert into independent power. Where Europe let ambition form automatically and exported it, and the Ottomans prevented the ambitious class from forming by recruiting outside the free population entirely, China recruited from *within* its own population by open, in-principle-meritocratic competition, and then structurally

denied the winners the one thing that would have let their success calcify into a rival dynasty: enough time, in one place, to put down roots.

China's position, then, and its answer: identify talent by competitive test rather than by blood, admit it into the hierarchy on that basis, and then keep moving it, so that ability could be used without ever being allowed to consolidate into something the centre could not later dislodge.

Part X — Three Solutions, One Position

Laid side by side, the three answers this paper has traced are not three different problems wearing different costumes. They are the same problem, met by three civilisations with no meaningful contact between them, each drawing on whatever materials its own history happened to leave within reach. Europe's landed nobility, its Church, and its eventual maritime reach across the Atlantic supplied the materials for export. The Ottoman world's existing tradition of slave administration, already present elsewhere in Islamic states before the Ottomans built their own version of it, and Islamic inheritance law's built-in resistance to estate concentration, supplied the materials for prevention. China's long-standing scholar-official tradition and a centralised bureaucratic apparatus already old before either Europe's feudal order or the Ottoman state existed supplied the materials for merit-recruitment and rotation. None of the three had access to the others' materials, and so none of the three could have copied a solution even if the thought had somehow occurred to them. What they shared was not a common toolkit. It was a common position: a hierarchy, once formed, needs administrative and martial capacity, and that very capacity, left to accumulate freely in the hands of any one family or faction across generations, will eventually threaten to replace the hierarchy's own centre.

This is exactly what position logic, stated carefully in Parts II through IV, predicts should happen, and it is worth stating the prediction one more time now that it has been tested against real cases rather than merely asserted. A shared structural position, run through the same benefit-against-cost engine by people who cannot see or copy one another, should produce a family resemblance in outline — because the position itself rules out most of the conceivable moves as unworkable, leaving only a short list of answers that actually solve the problem — while allowing real difference in the specific institutional form each answer takes, because the materials at hand differ from case to case and the field of the visible differs correspondingly. Europe, the Ottomans, and China did not converge on identical institutions. A Crusading knight, a devshirme-recruited Janissary, and a keju-examined magistrate lived lives that would have been unrecognisable to one another. But look past the institutional skin to the structural function each was built to perform, and the family resemblance is unmistakable: all three are answers to the single question of how a hierarchy keeps its own necessary servants from becoming its rivals, and all three answers belong to a short menu — export the ambition outward, prevent the ambitious class from forming by recruiting permanent outsiders, or admit talent by merit and then keep it moving before it can put down roots. This is what this paper means by the same problem three times, and it is offered as the clearest available demonstration that position logic is not merely a plausible way of narrating history after the fact, but a method that predicts, in advance of looking, roughly what an observer should expect to find wherever this particular structural position recurs.

Part XI — Why None of the Three Held Forever

None of the three solutions this paper has traced was permanent, and the manner of each one's eventual failure is itself informative, because in every case the pressure this paper has been describing did not disappear when its outlet was built — it only waited for that outlet's specific weak point. Europe's export mechanism worked as long as a frontier remained open to receive it; when Europe's own late-medieval outlets closed within a few years of one another in the fifteenth century, faster than any substitute could mature to replace them, the same landless-younger-son pressure that had gone abroad for four centuries discharged instead into domestic conflict, most starkly in England's Wars of the Roses. The Ottoman prevention machine held for roughly two centuries and then corroded from the inside: the rule barring a Janissary's own sons from the corps was broken in the mid-sixteenth century, and the timar grants meant to revert to the state on a holder's death began, across the same decades, to be inherited through bribery and favour instead — the very mechanisms built to stop a hereditary class from forming became, once broken, the vehicle for exactly that class's eventual rise, a bloated and increasingly entitled military corporation that by the nineteenth century had to be destroyed by force to be removed. China's law of avoidance rotated individual officials successfully for centuries, and

remains among the more durable anti-consolidation devices this paper has examined, but it did not close the door on hereditary advantage so much as move where that advantage operated: wealthy and already-established families could afford the tutors, the time freed from labour, and the multi-generational investment in classical education that examination success increasingly rewarded, so that a formally open, merit-based system came, especially in its later centuries, to reproduce a real if less rigid hereditary tendency working *through* the mechanism rather than around it.

The pattern across all three failures is the same pattern, and it is the honest lesson this paper draws from running the comparison to its end rather than stopping at the moment of apparent success. A structural pressure generated by a genuine and recurring problem — how to staff a hierarchy without arming its own rivals — does not go away because an institution has been built against it. It waits, and it finds whatever seam the institution's own design left open, however long that takes.

Part XII — Held as Tested

The strongest case against everything this paper has argued deserves to be put plainly, because the method this paper is demonstrating requires it of its own account no less than of any other. A determined sceptic could reasonably object that these are not three answers to one position at all, but three unrelated institutional histories that a sufficiently motivated comparativist can always make look alike after the fact, by choosing which features to emphasise and which to set aside — that primogeniture, devshirme, and the examination system arose from causes specific to each civilisation's religion, geography, and prior institutions, and that the resemblance this paper has drawn out is a pattern imposed on the evidence by the very method being tested, rather than a pattern found within it. This is a serious objection and this paper cannot fully dissolve it, only answer it as honestly as the method allows: the test of whether a convergence is real rather than invented is whether the specific mechanism — not just the outcome, but the actual structural move each civilisation made — matches closely enough that a reader could recognise the shared function even without being told to look for it, and whether the timing and manner of each system's eventual failure follows the same underlying logic rather than three unrelated stories of decline. This paper has tried to hold itself to that standard throughout, naming the institutional specifics precisely rather than gesturing at

vague similarity, and it should be judged against that standard rather than against the comfort of its own conclusion.

It is also worth stating plainly, in the method's own terms, what this paper does not claim. It does not claim that primogeniture, devshirme, and the examination system were the *only* possible answers to the position all three civilisations occupied, only that they are three real answers actually found in the record, and that a short menu rather than an infinite range of workable answers is what the method predicts should exist. It does not claim any ruler or reformer in any of the three civilisations understood the problem in these terms, reasoned through a menu of options, and selected one; each answer, on the far likelier reading, accumulated gradually through many separate decisions by many separate people, each solving a narrower version of the problem immediately in front of him, with the larger pattern visible only in retrospect and only from a height no participant occupied. And it does not claim the method determines outcomes rather than merely shaping the odds; two societies in structurally similar positions can and sometimes do choose differently, and where they do, that divergence is itself a finding — evidence of what a particular people, in a particular moment, valued enough to choose against the position's own apparent logic. The method offers a lens, tested here against three real and independently verifiable cases, and it asks to be tested further, against whatever the next case turns up, rather than believed on the strength of the cases already run. That is the whole of what it means to hold a method as tested and not revealed, and this paper, describing a method built on

exactly that discipline, has no honest way to ask for anything more than the discipline it describes.

A Note on Sources

The framework is Thomas J. Bryan's; the research and drafting are Claude's (Anthropic). The two-caveat engine draws on Amartya Sen's critique of the single-objective "rational fool" and Thomas Schelling's work on the credibility of threats, both explained here in plain terms for a reader meeting them for the first time rather than assumed as background. The account of the division of knowing draws on the philosopher John Hardwig's argument for epistemic dependence as a structural feature of complex societies rather than a lapse of the credulous. Europe's primogeniture, the Crusades, the Reconquista, and the Spanish conquest generation follow the standard modern historiography and the verified figures and dates already established in this collection's companion study *The Younger Son's Frontier*, to which this paper is indebted for its European case; readers wanting the fuller documentary record for Europe's case, including the primary and period sourcing, should consult that study directly. The Ottoman devshirme, timar, and müsadere systems follow the standard modern historiography and this collection's companion study *The Empire With No Younger Sons*, to which this paper is similarly indebted for its Ottoman case and its fuller sourcing. The Chinese imperial examination system's Sui-dynasty origins, its explicit break from the hereditary Nine-Rank system, its openness in principle to candidates regardless of wealth, and the law of avoidance (huibi) formalised from 1037 and its standard three-year

rotation follow the modern historiography of the keju system, cross-checked across several independent summaries of the institution's mechanics and history. The later, partial re-entrenchment of advantage through the examination system in Ming and Qing China is reported as a general and well-established pattern in the social history of the system rather than pinned to any single source or precise figure. Where any claim in this paper could not be verified to this standard, it has been stated as a general tendency rather than a precise fact, in keeping with the discipline the method itself requires. *Part of the collection* Patterns of Power. *Tested, never revealed.*